**Open Justice Centre Podcast - Episode 1 (Steven Sutherland)**

0:09
Hi everyone and welcome to the Open Justice Podcast.

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I'm Stacey Haig, I'm a second-year law student at the Open University and the current Open Justice Centre intern.

0:23
I'm delighted to welcome you to the very first episode of the series.

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In this episode I've had the pleasure of speaking with Stephen Sutherland, who is a fifth year Open University law student and also works with Victims Support Scotland.

0:43
Stephen's sharing his experiences of balancing work and study and reflects on the projects that first started his passion for creating change and supporting others.

0:56
We really hope that you find this an interesting and inspiring conversation.

1:02
How are you doing, Stephen?

1:03
I'm doing well, thank you.

1:04
Oh, God.

1:05
All the way from Scotland.

1:06
All the way from Scotland.

1:07
Yeah.

1:07
A bit sunny up there.

1:08
Bizarrely.

1:09
Yes.

1:12
Splendid summer this year.

1:14
It really is starting early.

1:17
So yeah, we're going to have a chat about these fantastic things that you've done so far.

1:25
I'm sure there's plenty more to come.

1:27
You're studying law at the minute, aren't you?

1:29
I am, yeah.

1:30
I'm on my 5th year out of six, so still feels a long way away, but I'm getting there.

1:36
So living in Scotland, yeah.

1:39
How are you getting around the difference between Scottish law, English law?

1:43
Are you learning them both?

1:45
I am learning them both, yeah.

1:46
I learn English law of course through the Open University, through all my studies over the last five years and of course my final year.

1:54
And I do get a fairly reasonable amount of knowledge as well through my job which is working with Victims Support Scotland.

2:03
How did you get into law in the 1st place then?

2:07
I think for me, it was always the area that I wanted to go into other than more recently politics.

2:16
And when I was a youngster, had it not been for the poor eyesight that I suffered from, I would have been a pilot.

2:25
From pilot to I don't know.

2:27
I don't know if that’s a step up, or a step down.

2:31
Somebody can make that determination for themselves.

2:33
But for me, it was always wanting to be a pilot when I was youngster, as a youngster.

2:37
But unfortunately, as I say, for health reasons, that that was ruled out before I even was able to contemplate such a decision.

2:44
And I always just remember being at school and thinking the only career I ever wanted to do was be a lawyer.

2:51
But having poor education at the time and not having the greatest like encouragement, I didn't know if that would be possible.

2:58
It certainly didn't feel like that at the time.

3:01
I was still set on becoming a lawyer.

3:05
Therefore I decided to go back and do some study and that's when I became student of the Open University.

3:11
There is a massive scope of opportunity through the Open University, having come out of school with very little qualifications.

3:19
As always, a really nice modern development and the education system that that can really help people because ultimately, I don't believe that a person's future should be defined as to how their brain is at the age of 16.

3:33
Yeah.

3:33
I just think that's, yeah, bonkers.

3:36
You've used that in the past as well for helping others.

3:40
Yeah.

3:41
My idea for that was to try and support people with visual impairment when it comes to interviews for jobs.

3:48
So this is before you started your degree?

3:50
This is before I started my degree.

3:52
Ultimately, I wanted to try and support people to go into job interviews feeling as though they're on a level playing field.

3:58
To the able-bodied persons you always say whereby they can actually feel confident in speaking to an employer.

4:05
Because having little or no eyesight makes basic communication more difficult.

4:13
It's probably a well-known fact now that most communication is non-verbal and when you live with little or no sight, you don't have the same social interaction, you don't have the same social cues and therefore that makes the basic communication a little bit more tricky.

4:29
Confidence levels are often less than what it could be if you're in a position of sight impairment or you know your hearing impairment or any other disability that can be debilitating to that extent.

4:41
So I just wanted to be able to help a cohort of people build confidence in the hope that they can gain future employment.

4:49
Had you been for job interviews yourself?

4:53
I had done, yeah, I’m not a lad, which kind of compounds the feeling here.

4:58
And it's the fact that there's not a lot of opportunity for people with disabilities to do jobs that are ones in which they can climb the ladder on the career, shall we say, and really fulfil an element of enjoyment.

5:15
Because a job shouldn't purely be about earning money to keep yourself afloat in life.

5:20
The job or career should be about something that gives you a sense of achievement and fulfilment.

5:25
It's something you can enjoy going to.

5:27
Again.

5:27
It's like the work to live, not work to work.

5:30
Yeah, kind of thing.

5:31
And ultimately, I do feel in the UK that we do live …..in the sunshine….

5:34
You're sitting in the Gold Coast over in Australia or something or I don't know, Palm Beach in America, somewhere where you get constant sun.

5:43
Yeah, whereas we’ve a good sun right now.

5:46
Yeah, that's certainly… we're still sitting working.

5:50
So.

5:50
But yeah, Speaking of America, when did you go over there as well?

5:57
Firstly, it's a good segue.

6:00
2017 was the year I went over to America, and I believe I was 23 or thereabouts and it was through sadly the death of an MP, Jo Cox, who was murdered in the year before in 2016.

6:19
She did a lot of work with the US and the US decided, you know, in honour of her life to do a social cohesion young leadership programme that allowed for 20 young people in the UK to go across to America and do social cohesion type work.

6:37
That would basically enable us to integrate with a variety of different areas of US society.

6:44
In the East Coast work, it involved for example, meeting organisations that would support with disability or homelessness or education on mental health or American gun control.

6:59
A whole load of political issues that were obviously very high on the agenda at the time.

7:02
And we got to learn about a variety of different views from America or from people in America.

7:10
And get to share my own experience of living in the UK with, for example, a disability or share my views on gun crime, for example, or poverty.

7:21
Or, you know, the education system, the, you know, their health system, our health system.

7:27
So the whole range of stuff that we spoke of and whole range of people we got to meet.

7:30
We also did a little bit of work in America planning for project that we would do when we came back.

7:37
And in addition to planning that project, we were asked to compete against one another.

7:41
So myself and the 19 others that were in America, we all asked, we were all asked to go to London about a week after coming back from America and participate in a grant writing training course that we took over the course of a day.

8:00
I came back to Glasgow, wrote out my application about a month or so later.

8:06
I was informed that it was myself that won the grant.

8:09
Yeah.

8:09
I mean, I was believe it or not, astounded at the time to have found out that I was selected, especially having had doubts at the beginning as to whether or not I would even apply, although I was encouraged by a mentor at the Scottish Youth Parliament.

8:27
Well, that's what I was just going to ask is the where did you get your confidence from for, you know, for making the application and going through the process.

8:34
I really don't know.

8:38
I think I just kind of had it in my, my mind that I, I guess, didn't have anything to lose or just wait, you know what, submit the thing, see what happens.

8:48
If it goes anywhere, great.

8:49
If it doesn't, you've at least tried.

8:51
Yeah.

8:52
And I submitted it.

8:54
Didn't really think much of it.

8:55
What was involved in that application was that it was very short.

9:01
Was it exceptionally short?

9:03
And actually that made it quite more…

9:05
That made it quite difficult and was after the written application, which as I say wasn't huge at all.

9:15
They asked that each of us do a 3-minute video conference.

9:20
Oh, OK.

9:21
Yeah.

9:21
I was wondering if there was a, you know, like an interview stage to it.

9:25
That's what it was.

9:26
OK, three-minute interview whereby we speak to one of the hosts from an organisation called Legacy International.

9:34
About a week later after that I got an e-mail which I actually still think I've got on my phone even now.

9:41
I've got, I've got a place that's now right.

9:44
I've been selected.

9:45
I'm going to America.

9:47
I'd got a couple of months to prepare.

9:49
I'd never been to America.

9:50
I hadn't travelled on my own again.

9:52
Having a disability of limited eyesight makes travelling a bit of frightening prospect.

9:57
Yeah, I remember the night before and my case packed, and it was a fairly large case for my time there and it was crammed full of stuff.

10:08
Of course I tried to zip it up and burst the zip, after all that hard work, I've been through the interviews….

10:12
Yeah, it was the suitcase that let you down.

10:14
Exactly.

10:15
My own packing inability has led me to a problem, and I’d not even left the house. Once that particular project was finished.

10:24
It was then when I came back and decided, not so much decided, but I was asked to do a project on my own, which then was the reason for the public speaking project.

10:37
That's why I wanted to do the public speaking.

10:38
I thought it would be a nice way to try and support a vulnerable group.

10:42
And there was my experience in America that kind of drove me to doing that.

10:46
I got $3000 of US state funding, which I think was the equivalent of about 2600 pounds at the time, which funded public speaking project and also funded a final event in the Scottish Parliament where some of the participants in the project in the training went to the Scottish Parliament and delivered a speech in front of friends and family organisation heads and MSP’s.

11:15
So the equivalent of an MP in Scotland, a Member of the Scottish Parliament and also the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament hosted the project and that's equivalent to the Speaker of the House.

11:28
And it was a really good success as well.

11:30
So I think there was a great cohesion between all the organisations in the book.

11:35
When you're in the courts, how do you adapt for disabilities?

11:42
Are there any specific areas?

11:43
Yeah, it's not as difficult as what it might sound and in fact it's actually extremely straightforward.

11:49
So the public speaking organisation that I was part of at the time and indeed the Association of Public Speaking, where you use a traffic light system which is very self-explanatory.

12:02
So that's all very well and good when you have the visual ability to actually see and recognise and acknowledge that particular system.

12:12
However it's not effective if you've got colour blindness or you're completely sight impaired.

12:19
or have no eyesight of any kind.

12:21
So of course, naturally you need to find an alternative.

12:24
And the way that we adapted it was to use a simple yet effective method of just using a small bell, a small bell that you might find on the counter of a shop, for example, that you would ding.

12:36
And what we would do is we would ding the bell at sort of maybe the last three minutes of the speech.

12:45
So if it's an 8-minute speech, then you do 3 minutes prior to that eight and then you would do another two dings, for example, maybe in the final minute.

12:53
And then that would allow the person who would know the system that they would get, they were getting to the end of their speech and getting close to that eight-minute, 8 minutes section.

13:03
OK.

13:04
And then of course, if they're over time, they've been doing it three times.

13:07
And again, that's the equivalent of the light, you know.

13:09
Yeah.

13:10
So it was a very effective way of doing it.

13:13
Obviously if you're deaf, blind, it becomes a little bit more challenging.

13:16
Yeah.

13:16
So there then has to be a different type of mechanism.

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And I guess sort of maybe using that sort of vibration type method would be one of sort of similar approach you could use.

13:28
Yeah.

13:28
So you could, you could use that as well.

13:29
So again, it's just about finding ways that are similar but different, but nothing, you know, that's going to win you a Nobel Prize.

13:38
Yeah.

13:39
Quite straightforward.

13:40
So, yeah.

13:41
Is there any little other things that you come across in the courts when you're working?

like anywhere..
Most places are simply not built, especially courts, to accommodate for accessibility.

13:55
The courts in Scotland that I've worked in are typically of an old fashioned type style of building.

14:01
Presumably many of the courts, maybe not all, but certainly many in England will be of similar fashion.

14:07
Where they're old buildings, they're not easy to adapt and therefore accessible room within a room can be a challenge.

14:18
So there is that element of it.

14:19
So someone has a wheelchair or they’ve got a disabled buggy, for example, you know, it can be really difficult.

14:26
So there was, there was that thing, hurdle that I don't believe there's going to be a one-size-fits-all type solution to.

14:36
I recognised that from an advocacy's perspective.

14:39
So me being a student would obviously want to go into a position in the future of becoming an advocate, whether that be a solicitor, advocate in Scotland or whether it be a barrister in England.

14:52
Of course, you would be doing public speaking, albeit within the setting of a court.

14:57
So therefore you would need to find the ability to present a speech in a way that isn't going to be a tied to a screen because of course you would need to interact with a jury most often than not.

15:10
So when you're interacting with a jury, you don't want to be tied to paper or an iPad.

15:15
You're reading through notes, and you don't want to be reading.

15:17
It's almost like it's a book you want to be able to project in the way you see lawyers do on like, ‘suits’, for example, an American TV programme when they are addressing a jury, and they're confident and they're telling a story.

15:29
Yeah, given the evidence, then summarising the facts and whatnot.

15:33
And you want to be able to project in a way that's really convincing and ultimately that's a huge part of being a lawyer is in the courtroom, you need to be convincing.

15:43
And you're not going to be convincing if you're tied to notes and telling a story through reading word for word off of a document.

15:54
So ultimately you need to be able to find a, a way as a as a person with a disability, specifically sight and build to be able to redo that.

16:03
And ultimately, you know, having maybe an earpiece in, for example, having little sort of bullet points being read into your ear could help with that.

16:11
Yeah, I was just going to say like, you know, technology and the advancements in technology, so how open are courts to having technology in there?
I know that you know they're quite strict with things so but I guess they're going to have to be at some point.

16:27
Yeah, absolutely.

16:28
Obviously it's absolutely I think it'd be a bit different if, you know, you're an advocate there

16:34
trying to do your job and present information as opposed to a member of public.

16:39
sitting at the back on the phone, you know, you can obviously see there's a distinction that has to be made.

16:43
But ultimately, certainly in my experience in Scotland, and I would expect England being the same, would be that if you have a particular physical challenge that that makes traditional presentations difficult, then I can't see why they wouldn't allow for adaptations.

17:02
And you know, you could argue reasonable adjustments.

17:05
So I would, I would certainly say that my experience I wouldn't have.

17:09
I certainly haven't seen any barriers.

17:12
I bet you sort of hit your degree knowing a fair bit?

I guess I did, yeah, having said that I kind of wish I did the degree a bit earlier.

17:22
OK.

17:22
Just feel that because I now know the length of time that it's going to take to get to where I hope to be and ultimately doing the Scottish route just adds more time, OK.

17:34
I guess the experience I had was the catalyst for getting more grounded and going back to doing the study and having confidence to do the study prior to the US trip, prior to the public speaking, prior to going to South Africa.

17:51
I just don't see myself having gone back to the Uni..

17:57
You mentioned South Africa, what did you do out there then?

18:00
South Africa was another brain scheme of mine.

18:05
Did you just sit and apply for all these random things?

18:09
Well, the South African one, I didn't even apply for it.

18:11
I just created it.

18:12
Yeah.

18:12
It wasn't Even so much as an application.

18:14
It was more I; I wanted to go abroad into Africa.

18:19
I didn't know specifically where when I first came up with this particular plan, I didn't even think this plan would even work.

18:25
It was just a, an idea that had in my mind.

18:29
However, I've seen that there was an opportunity in in Durban, South Africa.

18:33
And I spoke with the RNIB again and I said that I was planning to go over.

18:38
Is there anything that I can perhaps do that they can incorporate their organisation into this plan?

18:45
And one day I was in the RNIB offices, and I noticed that they were basically going to just dispose of a load of older equipment that they were not going to use because they have newer, better versions of that same equipment.

19:00
I can take that with me.

19:02
Why just destroy it?

19:03
Why take it to a wherever there's going to go to be, you know, destroyed?

19:08
It's still useful.

19:09
It's still decent equipment.

19:11
So as part of my project over in South Africa, I decided to take as much as I could with me and distribute this older technology to schools that would specifically accommodate those with disabilities, and again, specifically those who had sight impairment.

19:33
And I remember going into the main school that I was aiming to supply the equipment to; they had no knowledge of me bringing this equipment.

19:43
They knew I was coming, but they didn't realise I had the equipment.

19:46
I was bringing with them

19:47
And I remember the sheer shock of the teacher thinking I was trying to sell them the equipment.

19:52
This is all great, brilliant, whatever, you know.

19:55
She was ecstatic.

19:57
The little ones were drawn to it, and they could clearly see it was making a big difference.

20:01
Yeah.

20:02
But she's all, we can't afford to buy any of this.

20:06
And then she's shocked when I turned around and says, no, I'm giving it to you.

20:08
You know, she just she's like what?

20:12
You know, like she couldn't quite believe it and brought this stuff, what 5000 miles or whatever it is just to give…

20:20
And so, yeah, they were elated that I can bring this technology over to them all, be it very basic.

20:25
And they made a pretty good difference.

20:27
And it wasn't just about the technology.

20:28
There was other things I did there as well, a more practical support.

20:31
Well, so was there also.

20:32
But you know, the main feature for me was to provide this technology.

20:37
But it was just a random, yeah, you know, thought that had in my head at one point.

20:41
And again, I had to get the organisation, the RNIB behind that particular project.

20:47
And again, fortunately, they, they believed that I could do it, even though I wasn't entirely sure.

20:54
I just basically just went from one day to the next.

20:58
It grew and grew and grew and eventually it came to what it ended up to me and I was pretty pleased with it.

21:04
So at the minute, have you got anything, you know, any more sort of light bulb moments that have happened recently that you've that even stuff that you know that you'd like to do?

21:13
Is there anything at the minute?

21:15
Are you concentrating on your studies and obviously work with the victim support?

21:19
as I mentioned earlier, I think you're going to have to then focus on a long term scope as well as, you know, when I was younger, I had the flexibility to go and do these nifty projects that, you know, when you're young, you can do things a bit more freely.

21:37
Yeah, when you’re older adult life kicks in and that's never a nice thing...bills to pay…

21:44
work to do and all that.

21:46
So I don't know if I'll be doing anything of that extravagance any time soon.

21:50
However, I have had the idea a couple of things of going over and trying to sit in some US courts and do some trials in America that, well, that takes place.

22:01
I, I don't know.

22:02
But I think for the time being, it's mostly get the degree, determine whether I stick with the English system, which, as I say, has pros and cons or change and, and stick with the Scottish system, which from a practical sense makes better sense.

22:20
So I think it really is a case of getting the career off the ground now and acknowledge that that was a good time in my life that was really successful.

22:30
But I'm in a different era now.

22:31
I need to go and make basically a life for myself, a career and ultimately try and actually do something with the work that I'm putting into the Open University and make it count for something.

22:43
So ultimately it is more of a grounded position and maybe the gallivanting will start within a few years.

22:49
Yeah, I've created something that I can actually call a career before I get to my retirement age, which is, you know, remains to be seen what will come first.

23:01
Well, we'll definitely be looking out for you.

23:03
I will definitely and can't thank you enough for coming all this way and having a chat with me.

23:11
It's brilliant.

23:12
It's a relief to get out of the city.

23:13
Thank you.